

THE NAME OF THE AMARANTH: HISTORIES OF MEANING¹

Mihai Costea²

Department of Plant Agriculture
University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, N1G 2W1, CANADA
coste_amihai@hotmail.com

François J. Tardif

Department of Plant Agriculture
University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, N1G 2W1, CANADA
ftardif@uoguelph.ca

ABSTRACT

The cultivated grain and the weedy *Amaranthus* L. species (section *Amaranthus*) originated in the Americas. The Spaniards conquered the New World in the 16th century. Consequently, the North American species of *Amaranthus* could not have been introduced in Europe before this date. However, the name of the amaranth existed long before its association with plants in the genus described by Linnaeus. Several everlasting plants were named “amaranth” by the ancient Greeks and Romans, and in the medieval times. Among these, *Helychrisum* spp. and *Celosia argentea* L. are the most common. The name “Amaranthus” has had multiple meanings and ramifications through time: botanical, ethnobotanical, religious, literary and philosophical. This paper explores this history of meanings of the name “Amaranthus.”

RESUMEN

Las especies cultivadas como pseudocereales y las malas hierbas de *Amaranthus* L. (sección *Amaranthus*) tuvieron su origen en las Américas. Los españoles conquistaron el Nuevo Mundo en el siglo dieciséis. Consecuentemente, las especies norteamericanas de *Amaranthus* no se pudieron haber introducido en Europa antes de esta fecha. Sin embargo, el nombre del amaranto existió mucho antes de su asociación con plantas del género descrito por Linneo. Varias plantas fueron denominadas “amaranth” por los griegos y romanos antiguos, así como en los tiempos medievales. Entre éstos, *Helychrisum* spp. y *Celosia argentea* L. fueron algunos de los más comunes. El nombre “Amaranthus” ha tenido múltiples significados y ramificaciones a través del tiempo: botánicos, etnobotánicos, religiosos, literarios y filosóficos. Este artículo explora esta historia de significados del nombre “Amaranthus.”

INTRODUCTION

The genus *Amaranthus* of Linnaeus includes species that originated in the Americas, Africa and Eurasia. The association between these plants and the name *Amaranthus* is relatively recent. American cultivated grain amaranths (*Amaranthus caudatus* L., *A. hypochondriacus* L. and *A. cruentus* L.) and their wild relatives (*A. hybridus* L. and *A. powellii* S. Wats.) were introduced in Europe in the 16th century, after Spaniards conquered the New World (Sauer 1950, 1967). Other *Amaranthus* species, such as *A. tricolor* L. from Asia, and *A. blitum* L. from Eurasia were also associated with this name in or after the 16th century (Gerard 1633; Thellung 1914). Yet, the name of the amaranth had been used by the ancient Greeks and Romans almost two millennia before. Therefore, the

¹“Stat (rosa) pristina nomine/Nomina nuda terminus” U. Eco, The name of the rose, the final Latin hexamer.

²Corresponding author.

question is: what was the ancient amaranth and how did the meaning of this name change in time? An investigation into the history of the name “Amaranthus” revealed multiple meanings and ramifications through time: botanical, ethnobotanical, religious, literary and philosophical. This paper is an attempt to tell the story of the name of the amaranth.

Etymology and Nomenclature

Amaranthus L. Sp. pl.:989. 1753. = *Amaranthus* Adans. Fam. Pl. II, 269, 516. 1763.

The ancient Greek name used by Dioscorides (4:57, Gunther 1959), *ἀμάραντος* (*amárantos*) came from the adjective *ἀμάραντος*, unfading (alpha privative, not + *maráino*, fading), alluding to the everlasting nature of the flowers and inflorescences. In ancient Greece, *Amaryntus* was a village in Euboea, where *Amaryntium*, the temple of Artemis *Amaryntia* was situated (Strabo, The Geography 10:10, 12; 1959–1961). However, these names probably derived from the same etymology. The Latin form adopted by Pliny the Elder (Natural History 21:41, 1951) was “amarantus.” Instances when the word was not associated with a plant can be found in the Greek New Testament, 1 Peter 5:4, “*ton amarantinon tes doxes stephanon*” (“the unfading crown of glory”) and 1 Peter 1:4, “*kai amaranton*” (“will not fade away”) (see Rienecker 1980). Lucianus Samosatensis described a fresco painting of a flowery meadow as “eternal spring and unfading (*amarantos*)” (The Hall 9, 1949).

Later, Tournefort (1694) stated that the name came from the alpha privative (α)—“not,” and the words “*marceo*” (the Latin equivalent of “*maraino*”)—“to fade,” meaning “never fading” and “*anthos*” (*άνθος*)—“flower.” As Ray (1686–1688) observed, the second analogy was forced: “*Amarantus male cum ‘th’ scribitur Amaranthus.*” Thellung (1914) also noted that if the word “*anthos*” had been incorporated in the etymology, the name should have been “*Amarananthus*” and not “*Amaranthus.*” Both *Amarantus* and *Amaranthus* were used in the 16th and 17th century (reviewed by Sprague 1928). However, Linnaeus knew both forms and deliberately rejected the classical spelling *Amarantus* in favor of *Amaranthus* (Sprague 1928). The retention of the original *Amaranthus* spelling should be followed even if it is less desirable philologically (Saint Louis Code, article 60.1).

The Huauhtli.—Amaranths were called *huauhtli* by the Aztecs (see Wimmer 2003). We wanted to see if “unfading” served as an etymological root for *huauhtli* in the same way it did for *Amaranthus*. “*Huauh-*” in the Nahuatl of the 16th century was an independent nominal radical, connected with no other root. “*Huâqui*,” to dry, would give the name “*huâctli*,” a dried out thing, word which unfortunately could not be retraced to any old uto-aztecan roots (Wimmer, pers. com.). The history and ethnobotany of *huauhtli* are fascinating since its relationship with man goes back more than 6000 years (Sauer 1950; Cole 1979). The

uses of *huauhtli*, and its social, religious and economic significance during the Aztec Empire, are well known today (e.g. Sauer 1950, 1967; Cole 1979; Early 1992). *Huauhtli* played an important role in many Aztec religious ceremonies. Huge idols were molded from the dough prepared from *huauhtli* flour and popped grains, which were then mixed with honey and sometimes with blood. The idols were dedicated to several gods, among which the war god Huitzilopochtli was the most prominent. The rituals involved human sacrifices and the Spanish conquistadors tried to suppress the “pagan” culture by prohibiting the cultivation of the *huauhtli* (Sauer 1950; Cole 1979). Crop fields were burned and Aztec people killed if they were found to possess the plant or its grains. Despite their efforts, the conquistadors could not eradicate *huauhtli* and the plants endured the time, awaiting their new name.

The Amaranth: Several Everlasting Plants.—The name of the amaranth preceded the introduction of *huauhtli* in Europe in the 16th century. It also preceded the introduction of *A. tricolor* L. from Asia in the 16th century. Another Euroasian species, *Amaranthus blitum* L., was known in ancient Greece as “*blite*” (Theophrastus Book 1. 14:2, Book 7. 1:2–3, 3:2, 3:4, 14:2, 1916; Dioscorides 2:143, see Gunther 1959), and it became associated with the name *Amaranthus* only in the 17th century (Thellung 1914). The ancient amaranth was an everlasting plant used by the ancient Greeks for garlands of deity statues and in death rituals. Dioscorides (4:57, Gunther 1959) mentions ἀμάραντος (*amarantos*) as a synonym for *elichruson* (*Helychrisum* spp., most probably *H. arenarium* (L.) Moench), an everlasting plant with yellow flowers (phyllaries) used by the Greeks “to crown idols.” “The hair (the inflorescences) being drank with wine doth help Dysuries, & ye bitings of serpents, & Sciaticas, & ruptures, & it moves ye menstrua, & consumes the clots of blood which are in ye bladder or ye belly, being drank with mustum” (Dioscorides 4: 57, Gunther 1959). The yellow amaranth mentioned several times in Vatsyayana’s Kama Sutra, may also be *Helychrisum* (Burton 1963).

During the Roman Empire, Pliny the Elder described “Amarantus” as “*autem spica purpurea verius quam flos aliquis*” (Natural History 21:41, 1951). The description indicates that the amaranth at that moment was probably *Celosia argentea* L., an Amaranthaceae from Asia and Africa that resembles *Amaranthus* spp. in many respects. Indeed, the author distinguished the amaranth from *Helichrysum* (21:168), and the latter retained all the characteristics and uses previously mentioned by Theophrastus and Dioscorides. However, it should be noted that the name of the amaranth was again associated with an everlasting plant. The amaranth referred to by Ovid (4:435, 1931), Tibullus Albius (3.4.33, 1962), Plutarch (Questiones convivales 3.13.648A, 1949) and Columella (10:175, 1941) was also *C. argentea*. In the 15th and 16th century, the name *Amaranthus* (or *Amarantus*) was applied equally to *Helychrisum* spp., to the

amaranths introduced from the New World, to *C. argentea*, and even to *Gomphrena globosa* L., another Asian Amaranthaceae. For example, in 1542 Fuchs described and illustrated two amaranths (“*flos-amoris*”): “*Duplex est Amarantus: unus luteus (Amarantus luteus = “Helychrison” = Helychrisum arenarium) [...], alter purpureus (Amarantus purpureus = C. argentea)* (De Historia Stirpium 98–101, 1542). Matthioli’s illustration of the amaranth from 1563 (in Krutch: 128, 1976; Fig. 1) is also probably *C. argentea*. Henry Fletcher, a painter active in London around 1730, in a reproduction of a Pieter Casteels’ painting, identified a plant of *C. argentea* as “yellow Amaranthus” (see Segal 1990). “Floramore” or “Flour Amore” was equally a popular name for *Amaranthus tricolor*, for *Celosia argentea* (= *Amaranthus purpureus*, Gerard 1633; Henry 1829; Fisher 1998) and for the real amaranths (“*Amaranthus Pannicula Sparsa*,” Gerard 1633; see also Meyer et al. 1999). The confusion is understandable. *Amaranthus* and *Celosia* are similar in many respects, and North America was thought initially by Christopher Columbus to be a part of Asia. It is difficult to ascertain who was the first botanist to distinguish the two genera and who was the first to associate the name with today’s amaranths. The distinctive inflorescence of *A. caudatus* was described by Parkinson (1640: 753) and Ray (1686–1688, 1: 202). Although Ray did not mention *Celosia*, his “*Amarantus*” was classified accurately in the group with “*herbae florum imperfecto sexu carentes sunt vel femine*” (Methodus Plantarum, Tab. 5, 1684) (*Celosia* has bisexual flowers). It was Linnaeus who legitimized the differences between the two genera (*Celosia* Sp. Pl. 205, 1753; for *Amaranthus* see above).

The Amaranth: A Magical Plant.—Theophrastus, who preceded Dioscorides by approximately 300 years, did not mention *Amaranthus*. He wrote about the “magical properties” of the gold-flower (*Helychrisum* spp.), which was capable of bringing fame and wealth to those who wreathed themselves with the flowers sprinkled with an “unguent from a vessel of unfired gold” (Book 9, 19:2–4, 1916). However, Theophrastus was skeptical about “such tales ... (which) proceed from men who desire to glorify their own crafts.” Athenaeus of Naucratis cited Theophrastus, but in a credulous tone, affirming that the plant really is magical and capable of bringing fame and fortune (15:680, 1955–1961). Medieval herbalists followed Dioscorides’ synonymy and transferred the virtues of the “helichruson” to the amaranth. Joannes Ammonius Agricola called amaranth “*flos honoris*” (Medicinae Herbariae:35, 1539) because the flower was capable of bringing honor. Since “its flowers (are) dedicated to the gods and rarely to living men,” dreaming garlands of amaranth (was) a bad sign for sick people but a good one “for everyone, especially for people involved in lawsuits” (Artemidorus Daldianus 1:77, 1975). English colonists sailing for America wore magical amulets containing amaranth seeds to protect them (Cole 1979). Later, in the 19th century Americans believed that the amaranth could attract light-



FIG. 1. "Amaranthus" from Matthioli 1563, probably *Celosia argentea* L.

ning (Cole 1979). Today, hundreds of Web pages and magic books recommend amaranth as the flower of “protection, healing and invisibility” (e.g. Cunningham 1993a, b). Wearing a wreath of amaranth speeds healing (even of a broken heart) and grants invisibility. Fragments of an amaranth plant, collected on Friday night under a full moon, can even protect you against bullets... We wonder what Theophrastus would say to this?

The Amaranth and the Types of Immortality.—“Eternity points, in its amaranth bower” (Shelley, Bereavement, 1901). The quest for eternity and immortality is one of the major inquietudes of the human spirit. Physical or spiritual immortality, everlasting love and friendship, eternal happiness and virtue are different coordinates of the same obsessional geography of ideas. Amaranth was chosen as a symbolic flower to capture all of these meanings. That is why an exploration into the meanings of the amaranth name is at the same time a taxonomy of the types of immortality.

Immortal youth (life).—The first metamorphosis of the amaranth from an everlasting plant into an immortality symbol can be found in one of Aesop’s fables (the Rose and the Amaranth, 384, 1975). The Amaranth, envious of the “beauty and perfume” of the Rose receives the following reply: “I indeed, dear Amaranth, flourish but for a brief season! If no cruel hand pluck me from my stem, yet I must perish by an early doom. But thou art immortal and dost never fade, but bloomest for ever in renewed youth” (Aesop, Fables: The rose and the amaranth, 384, 1975).

Immortal hero and everlasting virtue.—At the funeral of Achilles, Thetis and the Muses spread “immortal weeds” on his grave (Homer, “Odyssey” 24:43–29, 1955). According to more recent sources that we could not trace in classical authors, the Thessalians placed amaranth on the funerary monument of Achilles (Thylesius Antonius 1531) or wore amaranth crowns at his funeral (Genlis 1810–1811). For Cowper, “the only amaranthine flower on earth is virtue” (The Task, Book 3: The garden, 1874) and for Sainte-Beuve the amaranth is a “symbol of virtue that never fades” (Causeries du lundi, vol. 8:142, 1926–1947).

Immortal love and hope.—The following verses of Gombault were taken from Henry’s Flora Historica (1829): “*Je suis la fleur d’amour qu’amarante on appelle/ Et qui vient de Julie adorer les beaux yeux./ Roses, retirez-vous, j’ai le nom d’immortelle,/ Il n’appartient qu’à moi de couronner les dieux.*” The old Victoran name of *A. caudatus*, “love-lies-bleeding,” is in direct relation with the shape and the blood red color of the inflorescence. “Hope without an object cannot live” and the amaranth is for Coleridge a symbol of eternal hope (Work without hope, 1972).

Immortal soul.—Although Pliny’s description of the amaranth was utilitarian, his words were later interpreted in a symbolic or mystical way: “*mireque, postquam defecere cuncti flores, madefactus aqua revivescit et hibernas coronas*

facit. summa natura eius in nomine est, appellati, quoniam non marcescat" (Natural History 21:41, 1951). In the Roman Empire of the second century AD, the custom of wearing wreaths was regarded as a pagan practice by Tertullian (1992) and Clement of Alexandria (1965–1983), a sacrilege to the crown of thorns worn by Christ. For Clement, the amaranth became an imaginary immortal flower, which grew only in Paradise and was offered as an eternal reward to good Christians. "The earth is not capable of producing this flower; heaven alone knows how to grow it" (Pedagogos 2.8.73, 1965–1983). As Irwin (1990) pointed out: "Clement ... was certainly not simply transplanting an actual earthly flower to heaven." He was adding two new dimensions to Aesop's symbol of immortality: the spiritual and the sacred. More than 400 years after Clement, Milton envisions the same heavenly amaranth, but his vision of the "immortal amaranth" is purely metaphorical:

"With solemn adoration down they cast
 Their Crowns inwove with Amarant and Gold,
 Immortal Amarant, a Flour which once
 In Paradise, fast by the Tree of Life
 Began to bloom, but soon for mans offence
 To Heav'n remov'd where first it grew, there grows,
 And flours aloft shading the Fount of Life,
 And where the river of Bliss through midst of Heaven
 Rowls o're Elisian Flours her Amber stream"
 (Book III, 351–360, and see also XI, 77–81, 1948).

Another, less solemn, type of heavenly amaranth can be found in Charlotte Brontë: "Happiness is a glory shining far down upon us, out of heaven. It is a divine dew which the soul, on certain of its summer evenings, feels dropping upon it from the amaranth bloom and golden fruitage of Paradise" (Brontë, Villette, Chapter 22, The letter, 1984).

Sacred amaranth.—In the 13th century, the name became an attribute of the Virgin Mary, a symbol of immaculate immortality: "*Amaranthus flos, sacro, qui non marcet, honore vicens*" (Johanes Germanus 1460 in Marraccio 1693). In a painting by Botticini, amaranth plants grow from the ruins of the palace of David where Madona adores the sacred child (D'Ancona 1977). In Southern Europe, amaranth was used to decorate churches on Ascension Day (Skinner 1925; Cole 1979), and some of the popular names included "the scourge of our Blessed Lord" (Dowling 1900) and "Discipline de Religieuse" (Henry 1829). It should be noted that blood symbolic, divine or not, is a convergence point between the Aztecs and the Old World.

Hermetic amaranth.—In 1653, Christina, Queen of Sweden, founded the hermetic Order of the Amaranth (Åkerman 1991). The emblem consisted of an insignia with a double A, a crown of amaranth, and the inscription "*dolce in nella memoria*." Henry (1829) mentioned the above inscription as appearing on a medal with an Amaranth in enamel. The exact type of immortality sought

by Christina can only be speculated: catholic ideal of virginity, everlasting and imperishable glory or immortal mystical bond (see Åkerman 1991). At least one of the aims was achieved because the Queen is still “*dolceinnella memoria*.” The emblem and the name have been embraced by the current Masonic Order of the Amaranth (Order of the Amaranth 1994).

A Plant or a Symbol?—“...Sad Amaranthus, in whose purple gore/...To whom sweet Poets hath given endlesse date” (Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, book III, canto VI, 406–408, 1976). Hundreds of writers, poets and sometimes even musicians have carved and deepened (or occasionally weakened) the name of the amaranth. Some of them are probably not aware that the amaranth is an earthly plant and not an abstract sign or symbol. This particular case illustrates the disparity between the symbolism and the reality of many names. The dispute over the presence of an existential relationship between a name and the named thing recurs from Plato’s *Cratylus* to modern semiotics. Whether the name is a simple convention (as Hermogenes believed in *Cratylus*, Plato, 1926), a sign that signifies (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*:3, 1992), or more than that is not for us to determine. This name traveled in time from plant to plant until it found its perfect match. Grain amaranths are “from the past for the future” (Cole 1979) and as weeds they will be “a perpetual source of trouble to farmers” (Macoun 1883). At the same time, the meanings conveyed by the name have probably changed our perception of the plants. Perhaps the amazing history of the *huauhtli* plants in the New World would have faded away without the unfading symbolism of their new name. One thing is certain: the amaranth will continue to grow, here or in Paradise as long as we do, or perhaps even longer.

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